

The Xenoglossy Analyzed by Linguists

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The practice of speaking, reading and writing in a foreign language has always required a lot of effort from the learner that is why so many enroll in language schools and university courses. In addition, living in a foreign language country is a way of learning. Even more difficult is the learning of ancient languages, since vocabulary, grammar, and syntactic construction are very different from contemporary languages. Even after learning a foreign language, the speaker must practice constantly, because in the same way that we learn a foreign language, the lack of practice leads to forgetting it.

So, with so much effort to learn and preserve the learning of a foreign language, imagine the possibility of the occurrence of someone understanding, speaking or writing in a foreign language that he or she has never learned. This is the case of xenoglossy, word derived from the Greek ξένος (xenos) "strange" and γλῶσσα (glōssa) "language", therefore, "strange language". It is the controversial ability of someone to speak or write in a language they have never learned through the incorporation of a disembodied spirit or the regressive hypnosis of past lives. Obviously, its occurrence is controversial, as we shall see below.

Understood by most Christians as an inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the most popular case is the episode in *Acts of the Apostles*, 2.04-13, when the disciples of Jesus spoke in different languages (ἐτέραις γλώσσαις - *etherais glossais*), an event known as Miracle of Pentecost, before Jews from different parts of the world, who claimed to

understand in their own tongues what the apostles said. According to those who believe in this phenomenon, it is the fact of speaking in an existing language, which can be understood by a same speaker of that language, which differentiates xenoglossy from glossolalia. The latter being speech through a cluster of incomprehensible sounds that cannot be understood by another speaker because it is a non-existent language commonly practiced by followers of the charismatic church and Pentecostal churches in states of delirium. The *Dictionary of Linguistics*, by Jean Dubois *et al*, defines glossolalia as follows: "The term glossolalia (...) designates the verbal delusions of certain persons mentally ill. It is characterized by the voluntary creation of deformed words, systematically associated with the same meaning and resulting in a language incomprehensible to those who do not know their vocabulary ..." (Dubois, 1973: 311). Glossolalia is also defined as "speaking in tongues", which is the assertion of meaningless syllables, in a way that resembles a real language (Matlock, 2017). Unlike glossolalia, Ian Stevenson (1918-2007) defined xenoglossy as "speaking in a real language wholly unknown to the speaker in his normal state" (Stevenson, 1974: 01). The written xenoglossia is also called xenography.

Recitative Xenoglossy and Responsive Xenoglossy

The term xenoglossy was coined by the French physiologist and parapsychologist Charles Richet in the early twentieth century. In 1974, well-known psychiatrist and parapsychologist Ian

Stevenson divided xenoglossy into two modalities: recitative xenoglossy and responsive xenoglossy. Recitative xenoglossy, as its name implies, is one in which the hypnotized or the incorporated only recites or repeats phrases, in a real foreign language, but does not understand its meaning, so it is not able to converse, nor to ask questions or answer questions. It is simply a matter of mechanically repeating memorized words from a real foreign language. In general, even parapsychologists or reincarnation sympathizers do not recognize it, as true xenoglossy, since it is the most frauds. In responsive xenoglossy, on the other hand, the medium or the hypnotized is able to elaborate questions and answers on his own, so he has a command of the grammar and vocabulary of the foreign language he is uttering, that is, he is able to converse comprehending the questions and knowing how to construct grammatically correct answers. This last modality of xenoglossy is what is considered as real xenoglossy by the adherents of this belief and so is the one that is investigated by the linguists of this supposed phenomenon. (Stevenson, 1974: 05, Samarin, 1976: 271, Thomason, 1995: 01, McClelland, 2010: 279 and Matlock, 2017).

James Matlock recently introduced a third category, passive xenoglossy, to explain the unconscious influence of a language not learned in pronunciation and in other aspects of the production of speech, reading or writing, of those mediums undergoing incorporation or of those patients during regressive hypnosis. Skeptics, however, suspect that this third modality was introduced to justify pronouncement failures and defects in grammatical

constructions of those who utter tongues that spoke in the past incarnation, since all the tests done by linguists so far have proven failures in pronunciation, comprehension, accent and grammatical construction of the languages spoken by the embodied or the hypnotized, as we shall see below. That is to say, for these skeptics it is the mind of the medium who creates the fraud of a language never learned by the embodied one, or the mind of the hypnotized one that creates the false impression of being speaking in a tongue, also never learned, of an earlier incarnation.

A curious difference between xenoglossy and the other experiences of previous incarnations is its objectivity and concreteness, which makes it possible to test the foreign speech never learned by the embodied or the hypnotized by speakers or linguists. That is, language is a concrete tool to verify, through professional linguists, whether the person investigated is correctly speaking a language they have never learned. Some tests have already been done, so that we will then report and analyze the most rigorously tested, therefore more cited in the literature on the subject.

The Xenoglossy Cases Analyzed by Linguists

If we believe the accounts of believers in this matter, the number of cases is uncountable. However, the vast majority do not have enough data to enable them to carry out detailed tests and rigorous analyzes by linguists in order to verify the truth of the event, that is, whether or not the investigated is actually speaking in a language that he or she has never learned. James Matlock's

Xenoglossy in Reincarnation Cases, published in the *Psi Encyclopedia* (Online), summarized 17 cases of responsive xenoglossy (Matlock, 2017), three of which, most closely analyzed by linguists William J. Samarin of the University of Toronto and Sarah G. Thomason of the University of Pittsburgh will be analyzed next (the cases of Jensen, Gretchen and Sharada).

The Jensen Jacoby Case

This was a Swedish peasant, who manifested himself in an American housewife, referred to as TE, under regressive hypnosis, conducted by her husband in 1955-6 for eight sessions. This case was investigated by Ian Stevenson and reported in his 1974 book. TE was born and raised in Philadelphia; his immigrant parents spoke English, Polish, Yiddish and Russian at home. The only foreign language she learned at school was French. She has never had contact with the Swedish language, or any other Scandinavian language. Stevenson confirmed that she never learned Swedish at school, nor secretly without the knowledge of her parents. He concluded that, "in this case, the ability to speak Swedish, as investigated, was not acquired through normal learning" (Stevenson, 1974: 71; Samarin, 1976: 271; Rogo, 1985: 158-61 and Thomason, 1995: 04). However, linguist Sarah G. Thomason remarked that, "his (Stevenson's) demonstration that there was no fraud in the case is convincing, but his claim that Jensen had the ability to speak Swedish is not convincing" (Thomason, 1995: 04).

Stevenson believed in the TE case and justified his investigation thus, "I report the following case because I believe it provides an example of genuine responsive xenoglossy. I think it is almost certain that the medium could not learn Swedish, the foreign language here investigated, through normal means. In addition, under hypnosis, she underwent a transformation into a male personality named Jensen, who spoke and understood Swedish in an understandable way. This personality was not simply reciting meaningless phrases: meaningful exchanges were exchanged with Swedish-speaking people" (Stevenson, 1974: 23 and Samarin, 1976: 271).

In contrast, the University of Pittsburgh linguist, Sarah G. Thomason, studied and analyzed the TE / Jensen case and came to different conclusions. According to her, "the Jensen's Swedish is, as Stevenson himself admits, less than perfectly fluent". She then pleaded three reasons to mistrust Jensen's ability to speak Swedish correctly. "First, Jensen uses only about sixty words spontaneously (i.e., in front of Swedish speaking speakers) and, according to Stevenson's consultants, eliminating the words correlated with English, German, and Yiddish, this number is reduced to thirty-one understandable words. Secondly, Jensen has a total Swedish vocabulary of about a hundred words; this is not very impressive when compared to thousands of words known by any native speaker of any natural language, even taking into account the limited context that Jensen spoke Swedish. Thirdly, he rarely answers questions with complete sentences (...) the vast majority of Jensen's answers are of one or two

words, without context sentences" (Thomason, 1995: 04).

Other researchers who know the Swedish and Norwegian language interviewed TE while she was manifesting Jensen's personality during regressive hypnosis, and they agreed that Jensen's Swedish was mixed with Norwegian. Stevenson justified this by claiming that Jensen's mother was Norwegian. In addition, Jensen, who lived in Sweden, spoke English. Stevenson, in like manner, justified that Jensen lived in the seventeenth century and immigrated to New Sweden in North America.

On the other hand, according to S. G. Thomason's conclusion, Jensen's Swedish is so precarious that she even dismissed the possibility of fraud because, she said, someone who had studied Swedish secretly with the intention of defrauding would surely know more than Jensen knows of Swedish (Thomason, 1995: 12). In other words, Jensen's Swedish does not even serve to deceive, because it is so defective. The University of Toronto linguist, William J. Samarin, who also analyzed the TE / Jensen case, commented that, "Jensen, who manifested through TE, was a very passive participant. Always tired, sleepy and lazy, he answered in a few words what was said to him, only rarely in full, but with very short sentences. Even more, they (the answers) combined very precariously, in terms of normal dialogue with questions put to him". He then presented a few examples of the inconsistent answers to the questions asked in Swedish.

Question: What do you do for living?

Answer: *Em bonde* [a farmer]

Question: How often do you go to Haverö? Do you go there often?

Answer: *Ja, ja. Här torv* [yes, yes, here market]" (Samarin, 1976: 272).

W. J. Samarin also added that, "Jensen's functional vocabulary was little more than a hundred words, but of these, only 60 were used by Jensen before they were used by the interviewers. In many instances, it was difficult to understand what Jensen was saying. There were occasional grammatical errors". Stevenson considered Jensen's accent to be excellent, but Samarin noted that, "the accent was excellent only on a few occasions that some words were poorly pronounced and others had an American quality" (Samarin, 1976: 272).

Sarah G. Thomason noted that when Jensen was asked how much he used to pay for the purchase of an item in the market, he replied "my wife" (Thomason, 1995: 13), confirming that he did not understand the question. She also added that "TE had a little experience with Swedish, and that many of the 60 Swedish words Jensen uses spontaneously are very similar to the words in French, English, Yiddish, or Russian, all of which TE had studied or heard at home as a child" (*ibid*: 13).

The Gretchen Case

This was a German-speaking personality who manifested during four sessions in a North American housewife, Dolores Jay, also through regressive hypnosis by her husband. Stevenson, who had a certain knowledge of German along with two native Germans, confirmed Gretchen's German proficiency and that she had never learned German

before. For them, therefore, it was an authentic case of responsive xenoglossy, although parapsychologist and xenoglossy sympathizer James Matlock himself recognized "lack of fluency and grammatical failures" (Matlock, 2017).

In the general evaluation of S. G. Thomason, "Gretchen's linguistic performance is qualitatively similar to that of Jensen. Like TE, Dolores Jay's earlier acquaintance with German was confined to television programs and a glance at a German book, and she studied a German dictionary" (Thomason, 1995: 05). According to this linguist's analysis, Gretchen's responses "are largely confined to one-word or two-words statements, and many of them are simply repetitions of the interviewer's question. Gretchen's vocabulary is minimal, and her pronunciation is spotty. For example, it pronounces the blue word in German as "blü", which is the English word "blue" with the German vowel "ü", but the blue word in German is "blau", which pronounces the vowels as the English word "cow" (ibid: 05).

Another suspicion about Gretchen's German is that she seems to be more influenced by spelling than by pronunciation itself. For example, she pronounced the German word "schön" (beautiful) as the English pronunciation "shown", whose pronunciation is not correct (ibid: 05-6). Another example of Gretchen's failure to understand the German questions happened when she was asked what she ate for breakfast, she replied with the word "bettzimmer", which is a literal translation of the English word "bedroom", but not the correct German for bedroom, which is "schlafzimmer", literally "sleeping room" (ibid: 13).

Therefore, in addition to not understanding the question in German, she answered by a non-existent word, that is, two errors in a single answer of a single word.

Stevenson explained that Gretchen was "illiterate and was a neglected child who spent most of her time in a kitchen with a maid who was poorly educated" (Stevenson, 1984: 46). Sarah G. Thomason contended that even so, people with little education have a vocabulary of thousands of words and grammar as complex as the spoken language of an educated person, so Stevenson's explanation is not promising (Thomason 1995: 13- 4). In addition, this linguist argued that, although Gretchen reported that she was illiterate, she at one point wrote about 40 words (some of them repetitions) in German, with misspellings, which resemble someone who learned only a little German (ibid: 06).

The Sharada Case (Uttara Huddar)

Different from the cases of Jensen and Gretchen, when speech in foreign language happened through regressive hypnosis, the case of Sharada (Uttara Huddar) happened through spontaneous incorporation or reincarnation. Uttara Huddar was born in 1941 in the city of Nagpur, Maharashtra state, India. Their native language is Marathi, one of the languages derived from Sanskrit. This city is hundreds of miles away from Bengal region, which speaks Bengali (the language of Indian poet and writer Rabindranath Tagore [1861-1941], winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913), another language derived from Sanskrit .

His parents spoke almost exclusively Marathi, I say almost exclusively, since in India, because of the diversity of languages, it is common for someone to speak more than one language, or speak a language by adding words from another language, especially English. Almost all the languages of India include Sanskrit words in their vocabulary, especially the proper names.

About 10,000 immigrants from Bengal lived in his city, but Uttara had no contact with these people. In her youth, she was not an exceptional student, but nonetheless developed an interest in dance, theater, and Sanskrit, attended a college and graduated in biology. After graduation, he taught at Nagpur University. She was also interested in spirituality, her father introduced her to yoga and meditation practice in 1965, after some time she tried the practice of awakening *kundalini*. However, these experiences had a bad effect on her mind in the year 1973, so she had to be hospitalized for frequent headaches and blackouts.

The earliest memories of her past life began in 1973 at the hospital. She was already interested in the culture of Bengal, the eastern region of India rich in literature, art, religion, music and dance. For example, one of the most internationally known Indian religious movements, the *Hare Krishna Movement*, has its roots in Bengal. Therefore, it was during the internment period that Uttara had the first experience of incorporating Sharada. She used to experience Uttara's personality one day, and the next day she would wake up with Sharada's personality, speaking in Bengali, saying that she did not belong to that family and to that place. Between February 1974 and April

1977, for example, there were 23 cases of Sharada's possession of Uttara's body. When she awoke to Sharada's personality, she spoke in Bengali, a language far from where she lived in India, so her family and hospital staff did not understand her.

In one of her psychotic outbreaks, she witnessed her director's dinner with a woman in the private rooms of this doctor, so she had a jealous crisis because she had developed a strong attraction to the hospital director, who did not correspond to her; she thought he was her husband.

Uttara went on to say that, it was Sharada, a Bangali woman, who lived in the early nineteenth century, then proceeded to wear the *sari* according to the custom of that region. Her family allowed eight speakers of the Bengali language to question Uttara, who confirmed that she, when possessed, spoke the Bengali language. Sharada provided the names of his relatives in Bengal, so Ian Stevenson and his assistants conducted a survey in that state and confirmed that the relatives mentioned by Sharada actually existed at that time, but only the male genealogy was found, so that the confirmation of existence Sharada's continued to be a doubt.

The intriguing thing about this genealogy of only male names is that when Sharada, in a state of trance, was asked to mention the names of her relatives, she mentioned ten names only of men and reported the kinship with six of them. She reported that her father was Brajanath Chattopadhyaya, her mother Renukha Devi and her grandfather Ramnath, both male names confirmed in the genealogy. However, five names mentioned by Sharada do not appear in the genealogy. Since the

genealogy mentions only male family names, it was not possible to confirm the existence of Sharada and her mother Renukha Devi. Ian Stevenson asserted that Uttara could not have knowledge of such a genealogy (Rogo, 1985: 152-3). However, the fact that Sharada provided almost only male names of his relatives and, coincidentally, the genealogy presents only male names leaves the suspicion that, secretly, Uttara may have had, in a very casual way, access to this genealogy, without the knowledge of others. What might have made this access possible was the fact that the genealogy was published in a Bengali magazine in 1907 (Rogo, 1985: 153).

Ian Stevenson researched Uttara's past and discovered that she received some Bengali classes when she was studying Sanskrit, he added that she learned only to read a few words and nothing more, not being able to read even a complete sentence. Nor could she speak Bengali. Stevenson's conclusion is that Sharada's case is a genuine example of paranormal xenoglossy (Rogo, 1985: 153-4). Another researcher, Akolkar, came up with a different result, claiming that Uttara may have had some contact with Bengali at her school and that she would have more command of the language than was expected (*ibid*: 154). The situation was complicated when the researchers found a former classmate of Uttara, who claimed that they both studied Bengali together. He assured that they had learned enough to do an elementary reading in Bengali. These revelations may be the signal that Stevenson exaggerated in his assessment of Sharada's case as genuine responsive xenoglossy (*ibid*: 154).

The linguist Sarah G. Thomason, who also analyzed the Sharada case, noted that "Bengali knowledge of Uttara may have been obtained by normal means: she read translated Bengali novels" (Thomason, 1995: 07, see also: Stevenson: 1984: 153). Specialists in the Bengali language who investigated Sharada's language skills disagreed over her proficiency. For example, one Dr. Roy said that 'Sharada demonstrated a complete mastery of the Bengali language', and one Professor Pal agreed. In contrast, M. C. Bhattacharya said that 'although Sharada could speak Bengali understandably, she did not speak fluently and sometimes had to seek for the words', this assessment was repeated by Ranjan Borra, who added that her Bengali accent was not that of a speaker native Bengali, was more to that of a non-Bengali speaker who learned to speak Bengali after childhood. Dr. Roy himself commented that her Bengali pronunciation was not good" (Thomason, 1995: 05).

The most important evaluation, however, was that of Tagore Bengali professor at the University of Delhi, Sisir Kumar Das, the only linguist trained among all the native speakers who studied Sharada's Bengali. He concluded that her Bengali was neither natural nor fluent, that her accent was foreign, that her Bengali represented a dialect inferior to the standard of West Bengal, that she spoke a non-native variety of Bengali of the twentieth century, not a variety of the nineteenth century and, in short, that her Bengali resembled that of someone who had learned Bengali as a second language, though not quite correctly (*ibid*: 07-8). Stevenson reproduced Professor Das's

testimony in full, but suggested that since the conversations between Professor Das and Sharada were brief, it could be that Sharada did not have time to "warm up" when speaking to him, and so did not demonstrate his abilities in Bengali, he also argued that Sharada's influence on Marathi might have explained his need to speak through the mouth of Uttara (Stevenson, 1984: 137). On this, S. Thomason remarked that, "not even Professor Das's testimony nor Uttara's deep interest in Bengali shook Stevenson's belief in the paranormal nature of Sharada's Bengali" (Thomason, 1995: 08). This confirms the revelations of one of his former assistants that, "Stevenson used to ask 'selective questions' to the investigated in such a way that they tended to get answers he wanted", and also: "there was a tendency on the part of Stevenson to unconsciously 'fill' a history investigated in order to make it more complete" (McClelland, 2010: 262 and Botelho, 2018: 08).

S. G. Thomason explained that, unlike the cases of Jensen and Gretchen, when Stevenson published abundant transcripts of the interactions between the investigators and the interviewers, the transcripts of the conversations with Sharada are scarce, "only a few excerpts from the English translations of the interviews (Stevenson, 1984: 206-9 and Thomason, 1995: 08), then she concluded that, "the sum total of the linguistic proof provided by Stevenson is thus inconclusive" (Thomason, 1995: 08).

The General Assessments of Linguists

Linguist William J. Samarin, in addition to being wary of Ian Stevenson's findings in the TE / Jensen case, also discredited his co-workers, claiming that "one cannot help but suspect that all or most of Stevenson's co-workers were , to some degree or other, 'fellow believers' inclined to begin with the premise that good faith xenoglossy is possible". Since they were not horrified when they showed a seed to TE / Jensen and asked her, what was that, Jensen could not answer (Samarin, 1976: 273). Well, it is inconceivable that a speaker does not know the word seed on his own, because, faced with a failure like this; no one needs to be a graduate linguist to convince himself that Jensen could not be a real Swedish speaker.

Broadly speaking, Sarah G. Thomason evaluated that "despite Stevenson's efforts to provide genuine proof in support of his paranormal claims, his linguistic proof is completely incapable of convincing a professional linguist. There are two main problems with this. First, his notion of 'responsive xenoglossy' is fatally flawed as a methodological criterion for determining a person's ability to speak a language. And second, most of the explanations he suggests for the obvious failings of the Swedish and German of his investigated fits his paranormal purpose squarely into the realm of pseudoscience" (Thomason, 1991: 86).

Against arguing, James G. Matlock remarked, "that Thomason and other linguists intend to see signs that Jensen and Gretchen are capable of performing (a linguistic proficiency) in the same way as mature native speakers, while Stevenson is looking for evidence that they have only some degree of language proficiency. Linguists

understand that a language handed down by successive lives will be structured like the language spoken in any past life, but Stevenson is open to a wider horizon of possibilities" (Matlock, 2017). What Matlock means is that an individual under regressive hypnosis or incorporation will not necessarily speak in another language in exactly the same way or with the same performance as someone in a normal state of consciousness. That is, there will always be an interference or an obstacle, due to regression or incorporation that will deform the proficiency in the use of the foreign language, so the linguistic criterion must be different from the parapsychological criterion.

Now if Matlock's argument is sustainable, then responsive xenoglossy can never be tested by scientific and linguistic methods, so that it will invariably remain, as S. G. Thomason has pointed out, as a pseudoscience.

Sarah G. Thomason evaluated the three investigations as follows: "All three investigated by Stevenson made mistakes in pronunciation and foreign accents. Sharada made grammatical errors in his Bengali, while Jensen and Gretchen were so laconic that their statements exhibit very few examples of grammatical constructions" (Thomason, 1995: 13). Moreover, "the level of comprehensiveness of Jensen and Gretchen was too low to convince a linguist that they had any significant degree of knowledge of a language. Contrary to Stevenson's beliefs, these individuals investigated showed no skill in languages beyond knowing a handful of words and some grammatical traits. Also, their passive knowledge of Swedish and German, their ability to understand the which was

said to them, was, if any, weaker than their active knowledge of words and phrases, for real speakers of real tongues, including second language speakers, have a much less passive knowledge than the active knowledge of the tongue" (ibid, 15). In addition, he concluded: "Stevenson's responsive xenoglossy is flawed as a criterion for proving the knowledge of a language, at least at the low level of understanding demonstrated by Jensen and Gretchen. So while one might agree with Stevenson that a genuine case of xenoglossy would be impressive for a case of paranormal phenomena, it is also true that no convincing case has happened so far" (ibid: 15).

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